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*NICHOLAS RAY: THE LAST INTERVIEW*

WITH KATHRYN BIGELOW AND SARAH FATIMA PARSONS

In May 1979, during a break from filming "Lightning Over Water" in collaboration with Wim Wenders, Nicholas Ray granted an interview to Kathryn Bigelow and Sarah Fatima Parsons. It was to be Nick's last interview before dying of heart failure about a month later. At that time, Kathryn Bigelow was a graduate film student at Columbia University, where she earned a master's degree, but had not yet directed her first feature film. Her close friend, Sarah Fatima Parsons, was a journalist from West Germany. Of course, Kathryn Bigelow is the Academy Award-winning director of the Oscar winner for Best Picture, "The Hurt Locker." Maybe more people will want to read this interview with her name attached. I wish someone would assemble a book of interviews with Nicholas Ray taken from various languages over the years.

Thanks go to Blaine Allan, who provided me with a photocopy of Cinematographe magazine in Paris, where this interview was published in July 1979. Blaine wrote a book entitled "Nicholas Ray: A Guide to References and Resources" in 1984 and teaches Cinema at Queen's University in Ontario. Thanks also to Laurence Gavron, who worked on "Lightning Over Water," and did the translation from French back into English, the original language of this interview. Unfortunately, the audio cassette recordings of Nick's expressions are lost. Special thanks go to Kathryn Bigelow and Sarah Fatima Parsons, who engaged in this dialogue with Nick 31 years ago. Although suffering from cancer and going in and out of the hospital for treatment during the final weeks of his life, Nick Ray was remarkably lucid in this conversation about his work, making it a valuable source for further study.

Here is Nicholas Ray's last interview presented in English for the first time.

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*Tom Farrell*

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A conversation with Nicholas Ray shortly before his death, which associates small memory pieces about his life and films.

Nicholas Ray: You know, I hate watching "Johnny Guitar" on television. But I really appreciate what Andrew Sarris wrote in the *Village Voice*: "With 'Johnny Guitar' Nick Ray reaches the absolute criteria of the auteur theory."

Question: What did you think when you went to Europe and noticed how filmmakers, especially, the French ones, were influenced by your work? Truffaut, for example?

NR: And also Godard, Rohmer. Yes, I did have a strong influence on their work. I'm not sure if it was always for the best. I remember one evening I was driving home during the filming of "Rebel Without A Cause." We shot a scene between Jim and Plato. I was whistling. I was really thrilled thinking, "My God, the French will adore that scene."

Q: Your films have also influenced the new German and American cinema.

NR: I hear that Wim Wenders is going to start a new film soon, "Hammett." He's a great guy. I think he's had a hard time with the screenplay.

Q: He originally wanted to write it with the author of the book, Joe Gores.

NR: He tried but it didn't work out. It seldom does with the author of a book. A lot of filmmakers have failed. I myself thought I could do it, but it was a failure. Authors fall in love with their own

words, and you have to be pitiless as a director or screenwriter.

Q: So that it won't become literature?

NR: Yes, that's right. I mean it's another kind of literature. They tend to get excited about one sentence, visualize it, and then it becomes really monotonous. You should never talk about something you can show, and never show something you can talk about.

Q: Doesn't it have something to do with what actors bring to a film?

NR: Absolutely. An actor can be as talented as another, but if he doesn't stick to what the director's intentions are, it all falls down. I adore working with actors.

Q: You come from the theater. I would imagine you have a particular method of work.

NR: Yes, I do have my method, as other directors do.

Q: What do you think of all the different interpretations?

NR: It's one of the beauties of cinema, or of any kind of art for that matter. Sort of a contradiction. I don't try to manipulate people. You're on. Do what you want. Some interpretations are shocking to me because they are ridiculous, but then again, why not? I have entered the kingdom of contradiction, but it's just as well. It adds to the reflection, even if sometimes it drives me crazy.

Q: Are you painting these days?

NR: No, I haven't in a long time.

Q: What kind of painting are you interested in?

NR: I was always a fan of German and Swedish expressionism. Edvard Munch, and medieval art too. I think my films express this tendency.

Q: Yes, like the colors and set design of the saloon in "Johnny Guitar."

NR: I had it built on the side of a mountain, in the desert, because I loved the shape and color of the rocks there. It's a kind of medieval Frank Lloyd Wright.

Q: For how long did you work with Frank Lloyd Wright?

NR: One year. I was studying theater in New York, but since I come from Wisconsin I would stop at his place once in a while. He came for a conference at Columbia University. I went to listen to him, and then congratulated him at the end. We took a walk together, and he asked me if I would become one of his first students, and I went over there to get a master's in theater.

Q: When you designed the sets for "Johnny Guitar," did you harmonize the colors specifically after any painters?

NR: I wasn't inspired by other painters, but of course I followed a principle of pictures. I kept the posse in black and white during the whole film. Herb Yates, the studio owner who was in Europe during the shooting of the film, looked at the dailies when he came back. And he said, "Nick, I love what I'm seeing, but it's a Technicolor film and everything's in black and white."

Q: You have used stereotypes, black for evil, white for good, and with a lot of humor.

NR: But the black and white are combined within the posse. They are penguins.

Q: The same combination when Joan Crawford wears a white dress with a black shotgun.

NR: That's baroque.

Q: James Dean, who was an archetypal figure of the 1950s, has become trendy again in the 70s. What do you think of this cult of youth? Of the frustrated aspirations of teenagers?

NR: This is all due to the negligence of an opulent society, the non-involvement, the lack of progress.

Q: All those also characterized the 50s?

NR: Of course. It was a time of opulence. It's easy to put labels on things, but it shouldn't be that simple. I don't know all the different forces in the present. This period of searching that we are living now is quite positive, but at the same time there's a big waste of time, a great irresponsibility. All the rich kids (talking about film students) spending 5000 or 6000 dollars a year to make their films.

Q: Do you think someone who's rich or supported by their parents doesn't have the necessary energy to fight for work, or that urgency in the effort?

NR: It's not a question of being able to fight for work. They are given all possibilities. They can talk about any subject matter they want to. But that's the point. Those subjects are so trivial.

Q: Which projects would you like to achieve now?

NR: I try to imagine something new. It's very disappointing not to be totally excited of something. I need that.

Q: In your film "In A Lonely Place" Humphrey Bogart for the first time in his career played a fragile character.

NR: Yes, I thought Bogie was fantastic, and in both films I did with him I took the gun out of his hands. The gun was a constant prop for him. For him as well as for me. "In A Lonely Place"

was a very personal film.

Q: Do you mean in terms of your marriage to Gloria Grahame? Didn't she leave you to marry your son?

NR: Oh, yes, it's good for the tabloids, but not very interesting. It happened years ago.

Q: Oedipus?

NR: No, there's nothing Oedipal about it. That is always what people believe, but it's not that terrible really. Oedipus's fate is to kill his father. But, shit, it's never been a bloody relationship. They are divorced today. Only two or three close friends have looked at the situation quietly. Everybody thought it was gloomy, and it made me feel like locking my door. And I don't think it was very healthy for my son.

Q: While shooting "In A Lonely Place" were you aware of Hollywood's cynicism as strongly as the Humphrey Bogart character is?

NR: No, I don't think it appears in the film. I tried to treat Hollywood the way I would a Pennsylvania cattle town. In Beaver, Pennsylvania, same things happen as in Hollywood. It's just not as much in the lights as it is in Hollywood.

Q: The real intensity of "In A Lonely Place" lies in the fact that there's no way for that man and that woman to get a fresh start. Suspicion triumphs.

NR: Yes, we don't really know anything about them. In the first draft of the screenplay that I had written with Bundy Solt the end was more clearly stated. He killed her and Frank Lovejoy arrested him. But I didn't like that ending. So I kicked everyone off the set, except for the actors, and we improvised the ending. We don't know exactly what it means. It's the end of their love of course.. But he could also drive off in his car and fall off a cliff, stop over in a bar to get drunk, or else go home or to his old mother. Anything is possible. It's up to the imagination of the audience.

Q: Wim Wenders in "The American Friend" seems to use the narration as an excuse to displace highly complex characters in beautiful and elaborate backgrounds. The story becomes almost superfluous.

NR: And obscure.

Q: Is it important to break the narrative linear structure?

NR: It's the way I've chosen for my autobiographical project. It's not chronological but based on spontaneity. Because things that are of any interest to you, that you write about in the present form, you might as well have heard them half an hour ago on radio, or else when you were nine.

Q: Did you enjoy working on "The American Friend?"

NR: I loved it. I enjoy playing once in a while. It allows me to sum things up, to tell myself that my way of working is still the right one. On the first day I found myself doing what I always scream at my actors not to do. We broke it down and began writing my part while shooting. Wim is very patient, and I felt very good, which is not always the best thing for an actor, feeling at ease. Sometimes it's good to scare them to death.

Q: While shooting "Johnny Guitar" I read that you would bring flowers to Mercedes McCambridge but not to Joan Crawford, or vice versa, just to create a tension between them. Is that true?

NR: One night Joan Crawford got drunk and threw Mercedes McCambridge's clothes on the highway. She was absolutely great at work, but sometimes anger won over her temperament. They were very different and Crawford hated McCambridge.

Q: Your films come from a very precise cultural period, and yet they do have a profound influence on our times.

NR: Do you think so? You think my films influence the culture of our time?

Q: Yes.

NR: How is that?

Q: The media project a certain image.

NR: They are reflecting it.

Q: Both.

NR: That isn't influence.

Q: Doesn't it work both ways?

NR: The important thing is people.

Q: Aren't you talking about conformity?

NR: How far does conformity go? Only a small number of women have gone through the "Annie Hall" syndrome. You see very few of them in cities of 50,000 people or less.

Q: But "Rebel Without A Cause" has influenced the youth culture we were talking about.

NR: It got a lot of people excited over someone they rediscovered. After this resurrection we will need another 20 years to rediscover it in a cave.

Q: Nevertheless, does James Dean symbolize something out of the social order, a sort of

rupture that we're still fascinated by? The film shows the symbols that society has attached to itself.

NR: The real interesting character of the film is Plato played by Sal Mineo. People wanted to believe in a story. There's no story. I just wanted to influence parents.

Q: To make them understand what they were doing to their kids?

NR: No, what they were doing to themselves. All the parents of that time had become a lost generation, and I always hear the same things about it, the same words. It's all so dated.

Q: In "Rebel without A Cause" parents represent law and order.

NR: Yes, I characterized them very deliberately. I'm very prejudiced for young people. But it was hard to reach adults.

Q: Is it a political film?

NR: Yes, Abbie Hoffman said it. Fuck politics. Politics is living.

Q: But in "Rebel" Jim and Judy seem to rebel against law and order, only to return to that law and order at the end... The film works within the space of that ellipse.

NR: That's when earthquakes happen.

Q: What did James Dean bring to the film?

NR: He didn't write the dialogue. Stewart Stern and myself did a lot of improvisations. Jimmy was immensely talented due to his open imagination.

Q: Did he imitate you?

NR: Oh, he would copy my mannerisms, but I don't think he ever imitated me because that's an aspect of directing I hate. I never try to show an actor what to do or what to say. He has to find out for himself. The role of the director is to guide him to that state, and then to implement it. Otherwise, everyone is going to imitate the director, and no director however talented can play all the roles.

Q: While directing are you often confronted by actors' weaknesses?

NR: Oh, yes, it's a great cathartic experience for them, and they tend to be stronger, becoming aware of their own limitations.

Q: Werner Herzog in "Heart Of Glass" hypnotized his actors, which tends to increase the hierarchy.

NR: To hypnotize an actor is to tell him when to wake up, to walk left, and go down the stairs. An actor must somehow contribute to the direction. One must be able to trust in his spontaneity, to set it in motion. We must help him get there.

Q: The character played by James Dean is sort of a synthesis of his own catharsis, and your concept of what a character should be.

NR: Yes, of my own will to accept or dismiss the character.

THE END